

By the Numbers

Using Analytics.usa.gov to Learn about Traffic on Government Websites

Amy Riegelman

In March 2015, the Digital Analytics Program of the General Services Administration revealed a new website that showcases traffic to federal government agency websites. The website displays data previously unknown to the general public. This website has many useful features as well as reasons to be cautious and opportunities for government information specialists.

This website features seven categories of web traffic data. The most prominently featured text on Analytics.usa.gov references the number of users currently on government websites. For example, at 10:51 a.m. CT on June 26, 2015, 131,219 people were on government websites. Below this real time web traffic data, the page presents a breakdown of hour-by-hour numbers. This allows users to learn when people are likely to visit government websites. As for June 26, 2015, there was a steady increase in users between 4:00 a.m. ET and 10:00 a.m. ET with a drop in users at noon ET.

On the right side of this web traffic dashboard, the Top 20 Pages are highlighted. Whereas the total number of people on government websites is focused on *websites*, the Top 20 list refers to individual *webpages*. This is an important distinction, and these labels exist throughout the dashboard—domains, websites, and pages. Researchers are able to see the Top 20 pages in real time as well as for the past seven days or past thirty days. This information opens a window into pages trending at the moment. It could be comparable to Trending Topics on Twitter but only for government information. For example, weather agency websites (e.g., National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and specifically the National Weather Service) were very popular on June 17, 2015, likely because of Tropical Depression Bill as well as flash flood threats in several states.

The next section on Analytics.usa.gov features usage information from the last ninety days. This section displays the number of total users as well as distinctions of devices, browsers, and operating systems accessing the sites. Surprisingly, desktop usage ranks supreme over use on mobile devices as well as tablets. On June 26, 2015, Analytics.usa.gov listed that 67.4% of users accessed government websites on a desktop while only 25.1% used mobile technology, and 7.5% used tablets. This counters trends recently shared by Google stating that searching on mobile devices now outnumbers Google searching on desktops.¹

As for browsers, Chrome had the most use at 38.1% while Internet Explorer followed at 25.9%. Safari only had 19.9%, and Firefox was only used during 10.7% of the visits to government websites. The analytics also capture operating systems. Windows captured the majority of visits at 58.4%, and other key players were iOS at 16.4%, Android at 14%, and Macintosh at 8.9%.

One could download data from Analytics.usa.gov by simply selecting one of the ten options and viewing the JavaScript Object Notation (also known as JSON) format which is fairly easy to read. Downloadable options include:

- People online right now (Updated every minute)
- Visits every hour today (Updated every hour)
- Visits by desktop/mobile/tablet devices over 90 days (Updated every day)
- Visits broken down by Operating System over 90 days (Updated every day)
- Visits broken down by Windows version over 90 days (Updated every day)
- Visits broken down by browser over 90 days (Updated every day)
- Visits broken down by Internet Explorer version over 90 days (Updated every day)
- Top 20 pages, ranked by visitors online now (Updated every minute)
- Top 20 domains, ranked by visits over 7 days (Updated every day)
- Top 20 domains, ranked by visits over 30 days (Updated every day)

If any technical issues arise, help is available by submitting issues and suggestions on GitHub (<https://github.com/GSA/analytics.usa.gov/issues>) or contacting the Digital Analytics Program (DAP@gsa.gov). While Analytics.usa.gov appears to be very user friendly and accommodating to user concerns, it's important to be aware of both causes for concern as well as opportunities for government information specialists. Only 292 domains and 3,823 webpages are being tracked on the dashboard, which makes this dashboard far from comprehensive. In March, the director of the Digital Services Innovation Center at the General Services Administration expressed hope that the number of domains would increase and eventually include all public federal government domains. But as of June, there was no noticeable increase in domains.²

As for what is actually captured in the data, examples include Department of Agriculture, National Archives and Records Administration, Department of Justice, Department of

Defense, Department of Health & Human Services, and the Environmental Protection Agency. View the full list of domains linked on Analytics.usa.gov and also available at this URL: <https://www.digitalgov.gov/files/2012/10/DAP-Domains-and-Agencies-3-2015-Sheet1.csv>. Examples of domains that are not tracked in traffic statistics include Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, the Navy, and the Marines.

With all of this web traffic transparency, what about privacy? According to the About this Site section of Analytics.usa.gov, the Digital Analytics Program does not track individuals and actively anonymizes IP addresses. With that being said, the data is descriptive in broad categories. As noted in *Bits*, a *New York Times* blog post, soon after President Obama made an announcement on immigration, there was an increase in web traffic on the US Customs and Immigration site (uscis.gov) specifically in geographic areas like parts of Texas, California, and Iowa.³ Geographic information on web visitors is currently being captured by GSA; this information is not displayed on Analytics.usa.gov, but according to the *New York Times* blog post, “though it [Digital Analytics Program] hasn’t made the data public yet and plans to add it to the analytics site within several months.”⁴ Government information specialists may want to advocate for larger geographic areas because of commitments to intellectual freedom.

Analytics.usa.gov reveals how government websites are used in the context of current events. Government information specialists could view this dashboard to have a better understanding of the information needs (e.g., weather, earthquake safety, IRS forms) of our users and even the time of day when information

is sought. Because Analytics.usa.gov is open source, the code behind the data collection is not restricted. There may be potential opportunities for government information specialists to use the code in unique ways or embed the data visualization on library guides. Learn more about the open nature of Analytics.usa.gov by reading the About this Site section. Analytics.usa.gov has potential to grow and include more domains. Government information specialists may want to remain current on what this web traffic dashboard has to offer.

Amy Riegelman (aspringe@umn.edu) is the Librarian of Government Information, Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Child Development at the University of Minnesota.

References

1. Associated Press, “Google Searches on Mobile Devices Surpass PCs in U.S. for First Time” in *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-mobile-googling-20150505-story.html>.
2. Rebecca R. Ruiz, “A Real-Time Peek at Traffic to U.S. Government Websites,” *Bits* (blog), *The New York Times*, March 20, 2015, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/20/government-website-analytics>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.